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ABSTRACT

The linear career path that once kept people working in the same job is not the standard career route for today's workers. Instead, many workers are now pursuing varied career paths that reflect sequential career changes. Although job mobility no longer carries the stigma once associated with job change, it can still be emotionally stressful. Job mobility is most prevalent among individuals who are first entering the labor market; however, a propensity for job mobility is not unusual in workers of any age or experience in a society where technological advances and global competitiveness are regularly creating new jobs and job roles. Often, self-efficacy and a positive attitude toward job potential are characteristics of adults who consider changing careers. Although many adults mentioned money as their prime motive for change, personal happiness was close behind. Experience can be a predictor of successful career transition. The ability to be flexible and readjust one's goals to accommodate personal values and interests is also important. It has been suggested that career counselors consider the roles of emotion in career development. Although changing careers may seem overwhelming to many, numerous examples confirm that career changes are possible and probable. (Contains 13 references.) (MN)

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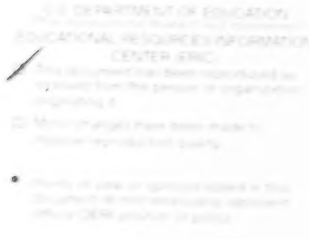

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Changing Career Patterns

Choi Joon Seo, a 31-year-old Korean who worked as regional marketing manager for Nike in Hong Kong, resigned his job so he could pursue his dream of building his own sports marketing company. (Jung et al. 2000)

Heidi Miller of Citigroup and Mary Cirillo of Deutsche Bank, two of the most senior women in U.S. banking, resigned their jobs to look for new career challenges in e-commerce. (Currie 2000)

Alan Goldstein, in response to his growing interest in computer technology, resigned from his career as trauma surgeon at Kings County Hospital in New York, and, at age 49, formed his own software company. (Mottl 1999)

Glenn Gainley, after working his way to vice president in charge of business units at Symbios, Inc., quit his job at age 40 and returned to school to pursue a teaching career. (Black 1999)

These examples of career changes reflect a common trend—increased job mobility. The linear career path that once kept people working in the same job, often for the same company, is not the standard career route for today's workers. Today, many workers are pursuing varied career paths that reflect sequential career changes. This set of ongoing changes in career plans, direction, and employers portrays the lifetime progression of work as a composite of experiences. This Digest explores how changing technologies and global competitiveness have led to redefinition of interests, abilities, and work options that influence career development.

Influences on Career Mobility

Job mobility no longer carries the stigma once associated with job change, although it can be emotionally stressful. Corporate upheavals of the early 1990s and low unemployment rates during the last part of the decade have caused changes in job search and hiring practices. Companies, especially those in technology fields that are in dire need of qualified, skilled, and experienced employees, are driven to recruit workers away from their current employers. Workers, who see job mobility as a way to find work that is appealing, challenging, and offers growth potential, are viewing career change as a way to progress through the uncertainties of the workplace.

Job mobility is most prevalent among individuals who are first entering the labor market. According to data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, high job mobility characterizes the initial decade of a person's work experience (Keith and McWilliams 1999). Neal (1999) reports that "men make two-thirds of their lifetime job changes during their first 10 years of work experience" (p. 255). Most of this mobility is the result of job-to-job transitions rather than unemployment and reflects the worker's desire to find a good career match, often through lateral movement within the company. As first-time workers are quick to discover, the reality of a job doesn't always reflect a worker's expectations regarding salary, responsibilities, and potential for professional development. This may be one reason that approximately 33 percent of the college graduates who elect to pursue a teaching career leave the profession within the first 5 years (National School to Work Office 1997).

The propensity toward job mobility is not unusual for workers of any age or experience in a society where new jobs and job roles are created regularly as a result of technological advances and global competitiveness. As global changes influence the way we live, they also have strong implications for how we work. Employment security is no longer tied to an organization, but rather to the individual's career management and resilience skills. "You must be prepared to live in an uncertain work world, where the only certainty is your skills, your flexibility, and your capacity to adapt to change. That requires optimism and belief in yourself" (Moses 1999, p. 29).

"Radical job changes are becoming a model for some (workers) and a strategy for those who are forced from their previous employment" (Sterrett 1999, p. 251). Sterrett defines radical job changes as "career changes that occur when leaving one field and moving to a job quite different from the previous job" (ibid.). Most successful transitions of this kind involve a two-stage process in which the worker first searches to find a suitable career match and then begins to look for a suitable employer. Although these transitions are typically associated with the early years of employment, radical job changes occur in midlife as well, as evidenced in the examples at the beginning of the Digest. Workers who know their strengths, interests, and values and are able to view themselves independently from their organizations experience the greatest success. Typically, these workers are positive, confident, forward looking, continually learning, and flexible.

Qualities that Enhance Mobility

Self-efficacy and a positive attitude toward job potential are characteristics of adults in a study conducted by Career Education Corporation of Hoffman Estates, Illinois. Results showed that "almost half of the working adults said they would consider changing careers and one in four said that they expect to make such a shift in the next 12 months" (Dolliver 1999, p. 40). Although money was given as the prime motive for change, personal happiness was close behind.

Confident in his ability to build his own sports marketing company with a worldwide brand name, Choi Joon Seo left his job at Nike in Hong Kong and, with two partners, launched HooChoo, a Korean-language online magazine about Korean sports. Choi plans to use the website to develop HooChoo's brand name, which he hopes will lead to the development of a full-time sports marketing company. "Physically and emotionally, I am exhausted," said Choi, "but it feels so good that I am doing what I like" (Jung et al. 2000, p. 44).

Foresight prompted Heidi Miller to direct her attention to e-commerce, where she sees potential for growth. Now working at priceline.com, Miller believes the company has excellent prospects for cross-selling products and services over the Internet, a potential she is not sure most insurance and banking conglomerates realize (Currie 2000).

Alan Goldstein was an early user of a portable computer, which he used to write his fellowship papers and record his research data while in medical school. Soon Goldstein was the computer guru for the surgical unit at Kings County Hospital, where he later "oversaw a patient-registry database project and an instruction program for sur-

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gical residents" (Mottl 1999, p. 123). When a relative who owned a family business asked for his technical help with computers, Goldstein became so interested that he took two 3-month leaves of absence from his prestigious position as trauma surgeon and acting director of surgery to set up the family business's computer system. He enjoyed this work so much that he resigned from his medical position to seek a new job. Goldstein is now chief technology officer of Ultimate Software Group, Inc., a company that develops human resource management applications.

Experience can be a predictor of successful career transition, as evidenced by Goldstein's success. His medical position gave him experience in developing team structures, assessing people and skills, and communicating with staff. His computer experiences provided him with new technological skills. In his own way, Goldstein was an active participant in lifelong learning, able to transfer his learning to a new environment.

The ability to be flexible and readjust his goals to accommodate his values and personal interests made it possible for Glen Gainley to make his move from business to education. While working at the chipmaking firm, Symbios, Inc., Gainley became increasingly aware that his prime interest was in helping children and his community. Because he had set aside money for retirement and the college education of his three children, Gainley was financially and emotionally able to quit his job and return to school for a teaching certificate (Black 1999). He was willing to accept the entry-level salary that often accompanies a midcareer change and engage in teaching—a career that some workers leave because salaries don't meet their economic needs.

Kidd (1998) suggests that career counselors give attention to the roles of emotion in the career development. She reports that it is often the sequences of feelings and behaviors that one experiences in his/her work role that affect the next career transition in the path to career development. "Feelings of success spur action" (ibid., p. 280).

Eric Watson, who worked for 21 years for a giant insurance company, had become vice president for global diversity. Having a great interest in the advantages of diversity, Watson attempted to bring a new view of diversity to his organization: "The new diversity is about differences of all kinds, even those that come from within a company itself" (Galagan and Salopek 2000, p. 52). As he broadened his thinking about diversity, Watson came to realize how diversity tools could help an organization deal with radical organizational change. Looking for an opportunity to embrace this challenge, Watson left the insurance company to become executive director of work force capability for an oil and natural gas business. Watson contends that he will have company leaders modeling the behaviors of a diverse company within 5 years. His commitment to diversity and experiences of success were strong motivations for his career move.

Conclusion

Although changing careers may seem overwhelming to many, the examples presented in this Digest show that changes are possible—and probable. Employment will be increasingly characterized by sequences of decisions and work/role transitions. Similar sequences of behaviors, experiences, and judgments will influence ever-changing career patterns. For workers who seek continued and rewarding employment, career management skills will become increasingly important. Workers will need to be able to identify their strengths, goals, and skills; conduct ongoing assessments of their values and goals; monitor themselves and their job situation; and develop the interpersonal and negotiating skills needed to manage organizational career systems (Kidd 1998). Life changes and career changes often go hand in hand, offering the skilled and flexible worker opportunities to use these changes to personal advantage.

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